

Tadmor-Palmyra: a unique civilization between East and West

Ted Kaizer

Over the last year the ruins of the Syrian oasis town Palmyra have finally made it, for all the wrong reasons, into the media's limelight. Long established as one of the main tourist attractions in the Middle East, second only to the rose-red rock-carved city of Petra in Jordan, Palmyra in the first three centuries A.D. enjoyed a unique civilization with an extraordinarily rich material culture. However, until the recent systematic destruction of many of Palmyra's key monuments and artefacts, the city entered the public consciousness primarily through its most famous inhabitant, 'Queen' Zenobia, who even made it onto banknotes issued by the Syrian regime. Here Ted Kaizer reminds us of what an irreplaceable and rich heritage is represented in Palmyra's antiquities.

Located between two empires

Even in antiquity, Zenobia's dramatic claim to the purple on behalf of her young son Vaballathus and eventually her capture by the emperor Aurelian dominated accounts of Palmyra. It is quite astonishing that, in contrast, no ancient source saw fit to comment on the city's distinctive culture. But Pliny the Elder, who never travelled that far east and presented a rather one-dimensional portrait of a standard oasis when he described Palmyra in his *Natural History*, at least emphasized the importance of her location in between East and West:

Palmyra is a city famous for the beauty of its site, the riches of its soil, and the delicious quality and abundance of its water. Its fields are surrounded by sands on every side, and are thus separated, as it were, by nature from the rest of the world. Though placed between the two great empires of Rome and Parthia, it still maintains its independence; never failing, at the very first moment that a rupture between them is threatened, to attract the careful attention of both.

This positioning between the two world powers of its day certainly facilitated the

flourishing of mercantile activities and helped to turn the place by the second century A.D. into the leading caravan city at the heart of a wide-reaching network of long-distance trade. Palmyrene soldiers controlled the desert streets to the Euphrates by subduing the omnipresent threat of nomadic raiders, and their militias were stationed at various strongholds along the river itself to supervise the route to the Persian Gulf.

A culture between East and West

Unsurprisingly, like many cities of the Roman Near East, Palmyra was known under both a Greek and a native name, Tadmor (still currently in use). But the oasis was between East and West in many more aspects. The temples with their monumental gateways and colonnades may have a classical appearance but also preserved native building traditions through the construction of inner shrines and (perhaps more doubtful) the occasional adornment of walls with stepped parapets. The distinctive local art embodied a variety of influences, ranging from classical models to exotic iconography, as seen in the recently destroyed 'lion of Allat' sculpture. Palmyrene art is often grouped together with sculptures and reliefs from other sites in the Near East,

above all Dura-Europos on the Euphrates and Hatra in the northern part of Iraq, under the misleading title 'Parthian art', because they are supposed to look alike. The honorific inscriptions on the statue bases lined up along the colonnades apply numerous formulae known from inscriptions across the wider Graeco-Roman world, while the local benefactors often find themselves honoured – in contrast to members of the elite in more classical cities of the empire – for financing and securing the safe passage through the desert of groups of commercial travellers, i.e. for seemingly 'Oriental business'.

The public bilingualism of Tadmor-Palmyra

This belonging to different cultures was perhaps most notably visible in the fact that many of the public inscriptions of Palmyra were bilingual, written both in Greek and in the local Aramaic dialect ('Palmyrenean'). The city's public bilingualism, which has no parallel in the Roman Near East, was also displayed (again uniquely) through the countermarks which the Palmyrenes imprinted on Roman coins to re-assign issuing authority: *sestertii* originally minted by the Roman state under Nero received a stamp of both a *tau* (Aramaic 't', for Tadmor) and a Greek *pi* (for Palmyra), with the characters being orientated in opposite directions. From whatever angle a person looked at the coin, he or she would therefore in theory always be able to read the countermark and hence recognize the coin as being from Tadmor-Palmyra. In the first century A.D., Josephus had already commented upon the dual place-name in his *Antiquities*, in a passage that mistakenly claims the Jewish king, Solomon, as the city's founder:

And so, when he had built this city and surrounded it with very strong walls, he named it Thadamora, as it is still called by the Syrians, while the Greeks call it Palmyra.

Dual appearance, one world

The unique location between West and East meant that Palmyrene citizens identified and expressed themselves with regard to both the Roman empire and the Parthian world, displaying different faces of the same local culture. On a sarcophagus found in one of Palmyra's typical tomb-towers, and later placed in the garden of the local Museum, a prominent notable is depicted twice: dressed in Roman toga in the middle of a sacrificial scene on the coffin's base, but wearing the so-called Parthian trousers of an Oriental rider reclining along his horse on the lid. And in a political context, one and the same person could boast to be both *procurator ducenarius* (a high civil office in the Roman world) and *argapat* (a Persian term denoting a senior position within the local community), showing how both imperial and Eastern governmental jargon had filtered into the city's ruling structures.

In the final phase of Palmyra's great civilization, the cultures from West and East continued to meet in spectacular fashion. Odaenathus, the city's leading citizen who was to become overshadowed by his widow Zenobia, gained the Persian title 'King of Kings' following his defeat of the Sasanian army of Shapur c. A.D. 260. But at the same time his subordinates, other Palmyrene notables, proudly recalled their status as main office holders of the Roman colony that Palmyra by then had become. Could there be any greater contradiction in terms than a King of Kings in charge of a Roman colony?

Palmyrenes on the move

As merchants representing the interests of their home-town (on the island of Cos, at Berenike on the Red Sea coast, and even in Rome) and as soldiers of auxiliary units of the imperial army stationed all over the empire (in North Africa, in Dacia, but also in the Near East itself at the Euphrates stronghold of Dura-Europos), Palmyrenes stood out by taking with them, again without parallel amongst other peoples, their recognizable art form, their unique deities such as Yarhibol and Malakbel, and their distinctive language with its inimitable script, as seen in the inscription accompanying the god, Shadrafa, in this relief. It showed the vitality of the Palmyrene culture and the obvious pride the citizens of Palmyra took in partaking in the various strands of their city's development even when far away from home.

Palmyra's afterlife

However, within less than ten years of Palmyra's fall in the early 270s, when the emperor Aurelian had finally managed to

crush the military might of Zenobia's city, that distinctive and now famous civilization had disappeared for ever. Palmyra first became a conventional fortress city in the new line of defence built by the emperor Diocletian and then swiftly turned into a Christian town. In the fourth and fifth centuries multiple churches were built and the oasis even became a See. The fact that Marinus bishop of Palmyra was amongst the participants of the meeting of bishops which devised the Christian Nicene Creed in 325 certainly indicated the city's newly found reputation as a regional centre of Christianity. In the seventh century the Arab armies of the Prophet's followers conquered the oasis, and it would be more than a thousand years later before British merchants based at Aleppo became the first European visitors to Palmyra of the modern age. Four hundred years before then, Zenobia had already been turned into the chaste warrior-queen of Boccaccio's *On Famous Women* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

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